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GOVERNOR MARTIN O'MALLEY ANNOUNCES CHESAPEAKE BAY BLUE CRAB POPULATION IS AT ITS HIGHEST LEVEL SINCE 1997

*Winter Dredge Survey Results Indicate 60% Increase;
658 Million Crabs Show Bi-State Management Actions Continue to Improve Abundance*

KENT NARROWS, MD (April 14, 2010) — Maryland Governor Martin O'Malley announced today that the Chesapeake Bay's blue crab population has increased substantially for the second straight year. The results of the most recent winter dredge survey show a dramatic 60% increase in Maryland's crab population. The survey indicates that 2008 management measures put into place through a historic collaboration with Virginia and the Potomac River Fisheries Commission are continuing to pay dividends with the crab population at its highest level since 1997.

Governor O'Malley made the announcement from the Crab Deck at Fisherman's Inn in Kent Narrows.

"Today, we can see firsthand what progress looks and feels like on the Chesapeake Bay. Today, because of the unprecedented partnership between Maryland and Virginia and tough decisions over the past two years, the Chesapeake Bay blue crab population is estimated to be 658 million crabs — a 60 percent increase over last year and the highest total population estimate since 1997," said Governor O'Malley. "While we are making progress, our work is not done and we are committed to working with our partners to achieve our ultimate goal of a self-sustaining fishery that will support our industry and recreational fisheries over the long term."

The population estimate is the result of the 2009-2010 Bay-wide winter dredge survey conducted annually by the Maryland Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and the Virginia Institute of Marine Science (VIMS). Last year, the survey estimated 400 million crabs overwintered in the Chesapeake Bay.

In 2008, Maryland, Virginia and the Potomac River Fisheries Commission (PRFC) took strong, coordinated action to reduce harvest pressure on female crabs by 34 percent. At that time, scientists from all three jurisdictions deemed conservation measures necessary as blue crab suffered near historic lows in spawning stock.

"While great strides have been made to rebuild our environmentally and economically important crab population, more work remains to be done with our steadfast Maryland partners," said Virginia Governor Bob McDonnell. "Two years does not make a trend. The scientific evidence shows our management measures are working but we need to continue along this path in order to ensure the Bay's crab population returns to robustness and remains at that level."

The 2008 conservation measures resulted in a large increase in the number of adults in the Bay during the 2009 spawning season, and this year's survey confirms that success has carried over into a healthy spawn. Crab reproduction this year was the sixth highest in the 21-year survey. The abundance of adult female and male

crabs also rose again this year, bringing the estimated number of adult, spawning-age crabs to 315 million, well above the interim target level of 200 million.

In addition, preliminary indications are that the 2009 Bay-wide harvest level was approximately 53.7 million pounds. This harvest equates to approximately 43 percent of the population, which is below the target harvest level of 46 percent. Watermen actually harvested more crabs this past season than in 7 of the past 10 years, confirming the long-held belief that a healthy harvesting industry can coexist with regulations that protect the long term health of the blue crab population.

“The final piece of the story will be confirmation from NOAA’s Chesapeake Bay Stock Assessment Committee that harvest levels did indeed remain below our target of harvesting no more than 46 percent of the blue crab population each year,” said Lynn Fegley, Assistant Director of DNR’s Fisheries Service. This is key to maintaining a healthy population.”

In 7 of the 10 years between 1998 and 2007, the annual removal of blue crabs exceeded the maximum safe removal level of 53 percent.

“Two years after initiating new management strategies, we are cautiously optimistic about the future of our blue crab. This abundance represents a terrific opportunity for commercial and recreational crabbers to realize an increased catch, in less time and at less cost, under current rules,” DNR Secretary John Griffin. “Based on the final assessment, Maryland, Virginia and the PRFC may consider modest management modifications by early summer. That said, we are committed to working with our partners to ensure we do not lose the ground that we have gained, and any changes would be based on continuing to remove no more than 46 percent of available crabs during any given year. History has shown us that abundance can change quickly, as evidenced by record 1993 and 1997 levels that were immediately followed by dramatic drops.”

The Bay-wide blue crab winter dredge survey is the primary survey used to assess the condition of the Chesapeake Bay blue crab population. Since 1990, the survey has employed crab dredges to sample blue crabs at 1,500 sites throughout the Chesapeake Bay from December through March. By sampling during winter when blue crabs are buried in the mud and stationary, scientists can develop, with good precision, estimates of the number of crabs present in the Bay.

Estimates of abundance are developed separately for young of the year crabs, mature female crabs, and adult male crabs. Together, these groups of crabs will support the 2010 fishery and produce the next generation of crabs.

“The substantial rise in abundance of mature crabs and juveniles was clearly a response of the crab population to unprecedented management actions, such as the closure of the winter dredge fishery, by the Virginia Marine Resources Commission and partner agencies. The increase was neither a random event nor a reflection of improved environmental conditions,” said Dr. Rom Lipcius who directs the VIMS component of the dredge survey. “From here on, we have to maintain the population at these levels to ensure the long-term sustainability and resilience of the Chesapeake Bay stock.”

In 2008, Governor Martin O’Malley and Team Maryland asked the U.S. Department of Commerce to declare the Chesapeake Bay crab fishery a federal disaster due to the historic low blue crab population. Under the leadership of Senator Barbara Mikulski, the Congressional Delegation secured \$15 million in crab disaster funds from NOAA’s National Marine Fisheries Service for Maryland to help rescue the crab population and provide needed economic relief to the commercial fishing industry. Governor O’Malley and the Maryland General Assembly also directed \$6 million in capital funding to the effort during fiscal years 2009 and 2010.

The funds are supporting a variety of efforts including license buybacks (to date, more than 600 Limited Commercial Crab Catcher Licenses have been retired), electronic reporting, processing equipment upgrades and restoration work being conducted by approximately 900 Maryland watermen. Under one such project, watermen removed nearly 8,000 abandoned crab pots or crab pot fragments from Maryland waterways in February and March of this year.

In December of last year, Governor O'Malley released an Oyster Restoration and Aquaculture Development Plan, a multi-faceted effort to rebuild Maryland's decimated native oyster population. The plan builds on efforts to restore the Chesapeake Bay and expand oyster sanctuaries and aquaculture leasing opportunities. Since 1994, the Chesapeake Bay's oyster population has languished at one percent of historic levels; quality oyster bars have decreased 70 percent from 200,000 to 36,000 (70 percent decrease) and the number of harvesters has dwindled from 2,000 in the mid 1980s to just over 500 annually since 2002. Today there are only eight oyster processing companies in Maryland, down from 58 in 1974.

For more information go to www.dnr.maryland.gov/fisheries/crab/winterdredgegraphs_041310.pdf

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